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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes precursors of aggressive behavior and discusses the trait characteristics of aggression. The accumulating evidence for the heritability of aggression, the consistent physiological differences found between aggressive and non-aggressive subjects, the fact that males exhibit more aggression than females, and the belief that aggression emerges early in life and remains persistent, reinforce the concept of aggression as a personality trait. Since these inherent factors influence aggression, when one examines the roles of situational determinants in stimulating violence, one should also look at the past and present situational context for violence in order to understand the emergence of specific aggressive behaviors. While personality is sometimes interpreted in terms of the three components of trait, state, and situation, in order to understand the emergence of aggressive and violent behavior at any given time, these three components are less illuminating than if one views aggression from a cognitive outlook. While trait, state, and situation all have their roles, the concepts of cognition, emotions, and context lend themselves more readily to psychological inquiry and their emergence and effects are more easily explained by principles of learning. (Contains 37 references.) (RJM)

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Symposium on Understanding Human Behavior and Experience - Traits, States, and Situations - Perspectives from Research on Aggression and Violent Behavior

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Definitions:

Trait - a distinguishing quality or characteristic, as of personality (Webster's Dictionary - 2nd College Edition)

State - a set of circumstances or attributes characterizing a person at a given time

- a particular mood or emotional condition

Situation - the objective conditions, environmental stimuli, etc. immediately affecting an individual.

Aggression, defined as a behavior which is intended to do physical harm to another individual, is a function undoubtedly of all three, traits, states, and situations. However, of the three, it is very likely that trait accounts for most of the variance when predicting to overt aggression and violence.

Amid all the debate and controversy in the last thirty years over whether or not there was such an entity as personality, let alone personality traits, there has seldom been any doubt expressed that there are certain individuals who are predisposed to responding with aggression across a wide variety of interpersonal situations. Aside from popular, common-sense notions, derived from

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personal experiences with persons who possess such a predisposition, aggression, as a variable of psychological study, has demonstrated the hallmarks of a deeply ingrained personality trait. Aggression is related to genetic and physiological factors; it emerges early in life and is influenced and shaped by a child's life experiences; it is consistently associated with gender and is stable or predictable over time and across situations. In all of these ways, aggression appears and functions like a trait. And like any other personality variable its expression in behavior is affected by the internal state of the individual as well as the external situation.

In the case of aggression, however, I don't really believe it's helpful for researchers to divide the personality pie into these three pieces. Trait, state and situation are often indistinguishable from one another and always interact. Current psychological theory and research in aggression emphasizes, rather, cognitions, emotions and context as they are reflected in the behavior of the individual. These cognitive structures which, in their development and evocation at a particular time are themselves a function of emotion and context, are exceedingly stable.

I would now like to discuss briefly the forerunners of aggressive behavior which give it the quality and function of a trait and at the same time point out where state and situation may likely contribute. The three trait attributes I will discuss very briefly are heritability, gender, and early emergence. I will then discuss early learning of cognitions and how these contribute to the stability of the trait of aggression.

HERITABILITY

The heritability of personality traits as well as their malleability by experience has been demonstrated in a study of more than 14,000 twin pairs in Finland (Rose, 1988). There is accumulating evidence that genetic transmission of this magnitude and quality is also involved in the development and prediction of aggression. Studies with infra human subjects document the heritability of aggression. For example, Lagerspetz (1971) has shown that the selective breeding of

mice for aggressiveness or non-aggressiveness resulted in the development of high and low aggressive lines differing significantly from each other by the second generation and persisting for at least 35 generations. While the studies with humans are not as striking, there is evidence for the heritability of individual differences in human aggression as well.

For example, a large genetic component was demonstrated by Mednick and his associates, in their Scandinavian adoption studies (Mednick, Gabrielli and Hutchings, 1984), to account for individual differences in crime and delinquency. These behaviors can be viewed as extreme manifestations of aggression. Our own studies (Eron, Huesmann, DuBow, Romanoff and Yarmel, 1987; Huesmann, Eron, Lefkowitz and Walder, 1984) showing predictability of aggressive behavior over three generations are not inconsistent with genetic transmission, although the findings, of course, are also consistent with a learning interpretation.

Contributing to the plausibility of the genetic transmission of an aggressive trait have been the studies explicating the physiological mechanisms triggered by the genetic effects. For example, variations in certain physiological systems which trigger aggression have been demonstrated to be differentially distributed among delinquents and non-delinquents (Lidberg, Levander, Schalling and Lidberg, 1978; Magnusson, 1985) and to predict aggressive behavior in a healthy group of adolescent boys and girls (Inoff-Germain, Arnold, Nottelman, Susman, Cutler and Chrousos, 1988). Moyer (1987) maintains that "the sensitivity of the nervous systems for various types of aggression may be raised or lowered by specific blood components particularly from the endocrine system" (p.39).

At any rate, the accumulating evidence for the heritability of aggression and the consistent physiological differences found between aggressive and non-aggressive subjects reinforce the concept of aggression as an individual difference variable which can be described as a personality trait, but one which is certainly influenced by the state of the individual (emotional or otherwise) as well as

the situation.

AGGRESSION AND GENDER

One of the more consistent findings in the personality literature is the difference in level of aggression expressed by males and females. This is true for most infra-human species (Scott, 1958). In humans, whenever direct physical or verbal aggression is expressed or measured, males as a group always score higher than females as a group. However, there are some females who obtain scores just as high as the more aggressive males. These are usually females who have been socialized like males (Eron, 1980). Over and above whatever differential biological equipment males and females are endowed with, there is ample evidence that, at least in Western culture, differential socialization experiences which encourage or discourage aggressive behavior are very important (White, 1983). For example, Fagot and Hagan (1985) observed responses of peers and teachers to aggressive and assertive acts of 48 toddlers, aged 18 months to 3 years. While girls' aggressive acts tended to be ignored, boys' acts received a response 70 per cent of the time. Thus, girls' aggression tended to extinguish, while boys' aggressive responses were reinforced. Our own research (Eron, Walder and Lefkowitz, 1971; Lefkowitz, Eron, Walder and Huesmann, 1977) has demonstrated the differential response of parents, peers, and teachers to aggression in boys and girls and the subsequent variation between the sexes in the presence and extent of aggression.

EARLY EMERGENCE

Aggression as a characteristic way of interacting with others and solving interpersonal problems emerges early in life. There is accumulating evidence that each individual develops a characteristic level of aggressiveness in childhood and that this aggressiveness remains relatively stable across time and situations into adulthood (Huesmann et al., 1984). This does not mean that situational or state factors are unimportant. Certain circumstances make aggression more likely for anyone, and at different ages, different forms of aggression become more likely. This is why both internal states

and external situations are important in helping determine how, where and when the trait of aggression comes into play. The stability we see over time and situations is a stability of relative position in the population. The more aggressive child very likely becomes the more aggressive adult. In a classic review, now 15 years old, of 16 separate studies with lags ranging from 6 months to 21 years, Olweus (1979) reported disattenuated stability coefficients ranging from 0.36 to 0.95, depending largely on the length of time over which stability was calculated. A few years ago, Huesmann and I (1984, 1987) reported on a 22-year longitudinal study that confirmed the predictability of adult aggression from childhood aggression. In this comprehensive study, 632 children were tested and interviewed at age 8 and again at age 30. Many were also interviewed at age 19. Using structural modelling we estimated the stability of aggression from these data to be about 0.46 over 22 years. Moreover, early childhood aggression in school significantly predicted adult criminality and a variety of other adult antisocial behaviors. Such predictability is strong evidence for the presence of a trait of aggression which is present in greater or lesser degree in most persons.

It is our contention that what accounts for the remarkable stability of aggression is the early learning of aggressive ways and the resulting cognitions from this learning. And it is a lesson that is learned very well. The payoff can be tremendous and thus it is difficult to unlearn.

THE LEARNING OF AGGRESSION

Despite the undeniable influence that genetic, hormonal, perinatal, and traumatic factors may have on the development of the trait of aggression, it is our view that a substantial portion of the individual differences in characteristic levels of aggressiveness among humans can be attributed to learning. The conditions most conducive to the learning of aggression seem to be those in which the child has many opportunities to observe aggression, is reinforced for his or her own aggression, and

in which the child is the object of aggression (Eron, 1982). It is our hypothesis that the convergence of these learning conditions with the previously mentioned innate factors produces cognitive structures that predispose a child to habitual aggressive behavior. These cognitive structures are the internal representation of the personality trait of aggressiveness.

Social behavior is controlled to a large extent by programs for behavior which have been learned during a person's early development. These programs are stored in a person's memory as cognitive scripts, which are used as guides for behavior and social problem solving. A script suggests a sequence of events - what is happening or about to happen in the environment, what is an appropriate response to thee events and what is the likely outcome. These scripts are stored in memory by an initial encoding of observed behaviors, followed by repeated rehearsal in action or fantasy. This rehearsal helps maintain the script in memory. A variety of learning conditions in the child's environment is linked to the development of cognitive structures that influence the likelihood that the child will encode, maintain, and retrieve aggressive scripts to guide behavior in social situations. It is the stability of these cognitive structures learned early in life, and learned very well, which account for the remarkable stability of aggression across time and situation, certainly giving aggression the appearance of a trait.

Situation

The immediate contextual situational determinants of aggressive behavior can be divided into those that 1) cue the recall of cognitive structures that control specific modes of behavior or interpretations of emotions, 2) frustrate the individual and/or 3)stimulate emotional arousal, e.g. particularly anger, or 4) reduce the inhibitory controls on aggression, e.g. alcohol and drugs. The latter determinants, emotional arousal, drugs and alcohol could also probably be considered as state variables.

The role of the specific situational cues in triggering aggressive reactions in the general population has been well established with experimental studies (Berkowitz & Frodi, 1979). Guns, knives, clubs, and other instruments generally associated with aggression clearly can cue aggressive reactions. The most recent theoretical explanation for these effects is that these cues activate scripts for specific aggressive programs of behavior (Berkowitz, 1984; Huesmann, 1988). Less recognized is the fact that individually learned cues that are semantically unrelated to violence may also play a role in triggering violent behaviors. A number of studies have shown that neutral cues once paired with aggression may acquire the properties of triggering aggression (e.g., Josephson, 1987). These cues may acquire their stimulating properties through either direct experience and enactive learning or indirectly through observational learning from real life or violent media. In fact, there have been a number of well publicized cases in which highly distinctive cues in TV programs portraying violent acts have seemed to trigger "copy-cat" acts by viewers, e.g. a broomstick, a can of 'Draino', a red gasoline can.

The potentially important role of such situational determinants in stimulating violence suggests that in order to understand the emergence of a given aggressive behavior at a given time attention should be directed not only at the situational context for any current acts of violence but also the situational context of past acts of violence. It is not sufficient to know whether or not guns or other cues semantically related to violence are present. Researchers and others should assess what other distinctive cues have been and are now present; so one can assess covariation over time.

While learning theory allows that some acts of violence may represent instrumental attempts to achieve tangible goals, more often such acts are probably motivated by angry emotional responses (the internal state). In some cases the anger may be a misattribution of an emotional arousal, a misattribution that may be triggered by situational cues as described previously. The tendency to experience anger is certainly a dispositional variable in which there are great individual differences.

However, the extent to which the immediate situation frustrates the individual and the extent to which potential victims are involved in the frustration can be expected to interact with disposition to affect risk of violent behavior.

Because research has shown that arousal may often be misattributed and, even if not misattributed, may increase the likelihood of anger and aggressive responses through "excitation transfer" (Zillmann, 1979), it is also important to assess the extent to which a person's situation produces arousal, i.e., a state. Research has shown that generalized sexual arousal in many situations makes aggression more likely (Barclay, 1971) As with the cuing effects described before, one must distinguish between the 'excitation transfer' process through which sexual arousal influences aggression (a state determinant) and the observational learning process (a situational influence) through which exposure to violent pornography may increase one's likelihood of sexual aggression (Malamuth, 1986). Other situational factors that may increase arousal or discomfort such as temperature (Anderson & Anderson, 1984) or physical living conditions, e.g. crowding (Freedman, 1975), may also interact with person or trait variables to affect the likelihood of violence.

Finally, one must include the use of alcohol or drugs as both a situational determinant and a state determinant of aggressive and violent behavior. Regardless of whether one is a regular substance abuser, the use of alcohol or drugs may both disengage self-regulating internal standards that inhibit aggressive and violent behavior and may heighten arousal leading to an increased likelihood of aggression through excitation transfer.

In order to understand the emergence of aggressive and violent behavior at any given time it is not sufficient to consider only trait, state and situations. Unless by situation you are referring to wider environmental influences than the immediate state of external affairs, you are missing a comprehensive understanding of this behavior.

These are the contextual variables which exert their effect on aggressive and violent behavior indirectly over a period of time through a person's cognitions, attitudes and beliefs. Social class and social status are the first examples that come to mind. Lower social status and lower social class are generally predictive of higher risk for aggressive behavior in the general population (Farrington, 1991; Huesmann et al., 1984). Because so many relevant psychological factors are correlated with low social class, it would be hard to pinpoint unambiguously the processes involved in this relation, but undoubtedly one could expect low SES to be an exacerbating factor for dispositional variables such as cognitions and emotions. In addition, as mentioned above, physical characteristics of the living environment such as uncomfortable crowding or temperature may produce accumulating feelings of negative affect which may increase the likelihood of violence and aggression, a state variable.

An even more potent contextual or environmental influence that covaries with SES may be the subcultural norms about social behavior existing in the person's cultural environment. Aggression and violent behavior is often inhibited by individuals' self-regulating internal standards (Bandura, 1986; Huesmann, 1988). However, these standards usually reflect the norms for the culture or subculture in which an individual lives. Over a period of time individuals tend to assimilate the cultural standards of the peers with whom they associate, including their norms about appropriate behavior. An individual with a given dispositional tendency to behave aggressively may behave quite differently within cultures with different norms for approval of aggression. Therefore, one needs to consider the normative beliefs of the subculture in which a person resides.

A related environmental influence is the individual's long term media exposure. Over 30 years of research have established that exposure to media violence is correlated with aggression in the general population (Comstock, 1991; Eron, 1963; Eron, Huesmann, Lefkowitz & Walder, 1972). While there have been scientific disagreements over whether this correlation reflects a causal

effect, the consensus for some time now has been that it does reflect a causal process, especially, but not exclusively, for individuals already predisposed in some other way to be violent (Comstock, 1991). At least three different processes have now been identified (Huesmann, 1982; Huesmann & Eron, 1986) through which media violence exerts long term effects on behavior: 1) through the induction of norms, attitudes, and beliefs justifying aggression and violence, 2) through observational learning of aggressive scripts for behavior, and 3) through emotional desensitization to violence. These processes are distinct from the immediate cuing and arousal properties of scenes of violence which I discussed under immediate situational determinants. Repeated exposures to media violence make people more tolerant of their own and others aggression (e.g., Drabman & Thomas, 1974), make the use of aggression as a general problem solving strategy for social conflict more likely (Huesmann, Lagerspetz & Eron, 1984), and may reduce the negative emotional affect associated with violent behavior -- a negative affect which is assumed to inhibit aggression (e.g., Cline, Croft & Courrier, 1973). Thus, when examining individual aggressive behavior not only is it important to assess a person's exposure to media violence in the immediate context of a violent act by the person, it is important to assess it over a longer run period prior to such an act. Childhood exposure to media violence has detectable effects on aggressive behavior even decades later (Eron, Huesmann, Lefkowitz & Walder, 1972; Eron, 1987).

In summary it seems obvious that in the case of aggression, trait, state, and situation all have their roles. However, I would prefer to talk about cognitions, emotions and context when trying to understand the development of aggression and violence. These concepts lend themselves more readily to psychological inquiry and their emergence and effects are more easily explained by principles of learning.

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